

Iraq Culture Smart Card

Guide for Communication and Cultural Awareness



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Instructions

Cultural Intelligence

Quickly learn operationally significant aspects of Iraqi culture.

Important information on customs, gestures, clothing, and holidays.

Reference guide to religious identity, social structure, and cultural history.

Visual Language Survival Guide

Graphics allow instant two-way communication without language training.

Language sections contain mission-relevant Iraqi Arabic.

Speak a phrase or point to it.

Response is communicated through pictures.

For additional information see MCIA's CD-ROM "Cultural Intelligence For Military Operations: Iraq"

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Religion

Five Pillars of Islam

The practice of Islam is based upon five pillars:



Islamic Flag Meanings



Muslims often fly colored flags to observe various holidays or dates of personal significance. Each color carries a specific meaning. Green is the color of Islam and is particularly meaningful to the Shia.

Islamic Religious Terms

- KORAN:** Islamic Holy Book, given by Allah to the Prophet Mohammad.
- MOSQUE:** Muslim house of worship.
- SUNNI and SHIA:** Two main branches of Islam.
- SHIA:** Form majority of Muslims in Iraq, but less than 10% globally.
- SUNNI:** Call their religious leaders Imams, but to Shia, the Imam is a supreme religious leader descended from Mohammad.
- SHARIA:** Muslim law.
- FATWA:** An order from a Muslim religious leader.
- WAHABIS:** Puritanical Muslims from the Hanbali school of Sunni Islam. Never shave their beards.
- MADRASSAH:** Islamic educational system.
- MULLAH:** Local religious leader.

Do This

In General

- ✓ Shake hands gently in greeting and departure, but always with your right hand.
- ✓ Respond to a woman's greeting only when she initiates the contact. Allow her to shake hands using only her fingertips.
- ✓ Refer to the entire family when making inquiries, well wishes, or blessings.
- ✓ Be patient; the Iraqi approach to time is slow and relaxed.

In Iraqi Homes

- ✓ Try all food offered to you, even if in small portions. Feel free to ask about the cuisine or its preparation.
- ✓ Appear relaxed and friendly; social interaction is critical in building trust.

As A Guest

- ✓ Be gracious; do not appear anxious to leave.
- ✓ Offer profuse thanks to host and wish his family well.
- ✓ Arrive on time for meetings, but expect casual conversation and a gradual approach to a business discussion.

Cultural Customs

Honor and Shame

Admitting "I Don't Know" is shameful for an Iraqi.

Constructive criticism can be taken as an insult.

Women will often wear head scarves as a show of respect, even if wearing Western clothing. Women are rarely without a male relative or friend for escort.



Family

Family is the center of honor, loyalty, and reputation.

Men are always the head of the family. No direct attention should be given to female relatives.

Personal Space

Iraqis do not share an American concept of "personal space" in public situations, and in private meetings or conversation. It is considered offensive to step or lean away from an Iraqi.

Women are an exception to this rule. One should not stand close to, stare at, or touch a woman.



Socialization and Trust

When conducting business, it is customary to first shake the hand of all males present, taking care to grip neither too firmly nor too weakly.

Allocate plenty of time for refreshments before attempting to engage an Iraqi in business conversation. It is important to first establish respect and trust.

Clothes / Gestures

MALE DRESS

White



Has not made the hajj, or pilgrimage to Mecca.

Black or Grey Checkered



From a country with Presidential rule (i.e. Libya or Egypt) and has made the hajj.

Red and White Checkered



From a country with a monarch (i.e. Saudi Arabia or Jordan) and has made the hajj.

FEMALE DRESS

Arab Dress



Arab women often wear Western dress with a shawl or head scarf.



Western Dress

Devout or conservative women wear a hejab, a full head covering, and an abaya, a body covering made of dark colors.

Western dress is common in urban areas, but traditional dress is still prevalent in rural Iraq.

GESTURES



Right hand over heart is a sign of respect or thanks.



Right hand, palm up, fingers touching, means to slow down or be patient.



Quick upward head snap with tongue click means no.

Ethnic Groups

Arabs: 18.5 Million

- Descended from nomadic Bedouin tribes.
- Culture closely intertwined with Islam.
- 65% Shia Muslim / 35% Sunni Muslim.
- Most are members of one of Iraq's 150 tribes.

Kurds: 5 Million

- Ethnically distinct from Arabs, Turks, and Persians (Iranians).
- "Kurd" originally used to denote non-Arab nomads.
- Speak Kurdish, a language distinct from Arabic and Turkish; similar to Persian.
- Most are Sunni Muslim. Sufi orders are prevalent and influential.

Assyrians/Chaldeans: 800,000

- Claim to be heirs to the ancient civilizations of Mesopotamia.
- Christians.
- Live in urban areas and throughout northern Iraq.

Turkoman: 500,000

- Ethnically related to Turks and Azeris.
- 66% are Sunni Muslims and 33% Shia Muslims.
- Primary language is Turkish. Most are also fluent in Arabic.
- Most live in Iraq's northern cities.



Don't Do This

- ✗ Don't use your left hand for contact with others, eating, or gestures. It is considered unclean.
- ✗ Don't show women attention by addressing, touching, or staring at them. Don't ask males direct questions about female relatives.
- ✗ Don't withdraw if a man greets you with a hug and a kiss. This is a common greeting among friends.
- ✗ Don't point with a finger; it is a sign of contempt. Instead, point with your entire hand.
- ✗ Don't ask a single opinion on an issue, as Iraqis often first reply with the answer they think you want to hear, rather than an honest response.
- ✗ Don't slouch, lean, or appear disinterested when conversing with Iraqi men. Do not expose the soles of feet or shoes.
- ✗ Don't back away from an Iraqi during conversation. Close personal interaction is customary and distance is considered rude.
- ✗ Don't offer a Muslim food or drink or consume either publicly during Ramadan. Never offer a Muslim alcohol or pork.
- ✗ Don't engage in religious discussions.
- ✗ Don't make the "OK" or "thumbs up" signs; they are considered obscene.
- ✗ Don't praise an Iraqi's possessions too much. He may give them to you and expect something of equal value in return.

Cultural Attitudes

Arabs

- Arabs view Kurds as separatists within Iraq and are wary of their desire for autonomy.
- Arabs view the Christian Assyrian and Chaldean as Iraqis, but recent Islamic extremism has sparked some hostility toward them.
- Arabs look down upon the Turkoman because they generally view Turkish culture as inferior.
- Arabs view Iranian Persians negatively and fear the historically strong political and cultural influence of Persia.

Shia and Sunni Arab

- Tension exists between Shia and Sunni Arabs over access to political and economic power.
- Sunnis blame Shia for undermining the mythical unity of Islam and they view them as less loyal to Iraq.
- Shia blame Sunnis for marginalizing the Shia majority and recent Sunni attempts to question their loyalty to Iraq.

Kurds

- Kurds are openly hostile toward Iraqi Arabs and seek to assert their political and cultural independence.
- Kurds are distrustful of the Turkoman, so they have competing claims over Kirkuk.
- Kurds do not interact much with Assyrian and Chaldean.

Assyrians

- Assyrians experienced persecution by both Kurds and Arabs.
- Assyrians recognize their minority status as a religious and ethnic group.
- Assyrians believe they have much in common with the Chaldeans, including ethnic and Christian religious heritage.

Chaldeans

- Chaldeans rejoined the Catholic Church in the 18th century and do not believe that they are similar to Assyrians.
- As a religious and ethnic minority, the Chaldeans distrust both Kurdish and Arab intentions.
- They have peaceful relations with Turkoman.

Turkoman

- Turkoman view themselves as a marginalized repressed minority and seek greater influence in Iraq.
- Turkoman fear Kurds, and there has been a long history of conflict between the two groups.
- Turkoman identify closely with Turkey and the Ottoman period of Iraqi history.

Social Structure

	Sunni Arabs	Shia Arabs	Kurds	Assyrians	Chaldeans
Pan-Arabism					
State					
Religion					
Tribe					
Clan					
Family					

Levels of Importance

High (Red)

Medium (Blue)

Low (Green)

None (White)

CLANS are extended families that trace their lineage to one patriarchal figure.

TRIBES usually consist of several clans, all of which claim a common ancestor. Tribes mediate conflict and distribute economic goods. Tribes cultivate values, such as loyalty, bravery, and shame. These are central to Arab identity.

PAN-ARABISM emphasizes solidarity between Arabs across national borders.

